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RUEHDM/AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS PRIORITY 5365  
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SUBJECT: SAUDI INTERIOR MINISTRY OFFERS ASSESSMENT OF  
YEMEN'S SECURITY

REF: RIYADH 118

Classified By: Ambassador James B. Smith, reasons 1.4 (b and d).

11. (S) Summary: The Saudi Ministry of Interior briefed visiting NEA A/S Jeffrey Feltman on its concerns about regional stability, centering on Yemen, Iraq, Iran and Syria. MOI is concerned that Yemeni leaders do not have a coherent vision for the development of the country, and are instead preoccupied with survival strategies as they confront multiple domestic challengers, including Al Qaeda. MOI is frustrated that the Yemeni Government seems more concerned about combating domestic Yemeni challengers, rather than Al Qaeda, which Saudi Arabia believes is a more serious long-term threat. Saudi Arabia continues to offer assistance to Yemen as an inducement to get Yemeni forces to be more active in confronting Al Qaeda. MOI believes that Iran directed the Houthis to attack the Saudi border in December, which would make little sense otherwise. MOI remains concerned about Iranian actions elsewhere, including in Iraq, although it is gradually seeing its influence wane in Baghdad. MOI has good working relations with some Iraqi security forces, as well as with Syria, with whom it has recently restarted repatriation of Saudi prisoners. MOI officials expressed concern about the ongoing Transportation Safety Administration regulations for passenger screening, which they believe are eroding popular Saudi support for bilateral cooperation. MOI officials lauded ongoing cooperation with MOI's critical infrastructure protection program (OPM-MOI). End Summary.  
Yemen:

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12. (S) On January 26, NEA A/S Feltman met with Dr. Saad Al-Jabri and Major General Khalid Humaydan of the Ministry of Interior, who briefed him on a variety of regional security concerns, including an extensive overview of MOI's current thinking on Yemen. MG Humaydan said the current trouble with Yemen has its roots in the collapse of the old monarchy in the early 1960's, leading to the 1961-67 civil war. The stated goals of the subsequent revolution, or coup (depending on which side you were on), were to end an authoritarian regime. The reality is that "everything failed," and "repression is back," exercised by political parties, tribes, the military and corruption. Today, "everything is for sale in Yemen, including loyalty." MG Humaydan said Saudi Arabia's initial optimism about the prospects for stability after unification in the 1980's were dashed by the 1994 war, which imposed a single country by force. Saudi Arabia believes that the reconciliation effort failed, in part because President Saleh's opponents were largely excluded. MOI has concluded that Yemeni leaders are now playing a "survival game," with no clear strategic plan to take Yemen into the 21st century. Instead, most of the government's tactics seem focused on maintaining the status quo.

13. (S) The MOI team identified several problems with that approach, including a range of opponents of the Yemeni regime, such as Al Qaeda and several different separatist groups. While Saudi Arabia's focus is clearly on Al Qaeda, the MOI team said that Saleh's government is primarily

focused on the Houthis and southern separatists. MOI is very concerned that Al Qaeda is so active in Yemen, which has a lot of similarities to Afghanistan, both in terms of geography and tribal makeup, as well as a long tradition of resistance to central rule. MOI has long believed that, as Al Qaeda fails in Iraq, it will infest Yemen, in part because it is so close to its main targets, the two holy mosques and extensive oil reserves in Saudi Arabia. MG Humayadan also noted that Yemen's persistent corruption and poverty provide Al Qaeda a lot of tools.

¶4. (C) The MOI team said that they are trying to convince Yemen to take action on the ground against Al Qaeda and deprive it of an operational address for men and money. Saudi Arabia has been offering help in terms of money and technical assistance as an inducement to the Yemeni Government to move against Al Qaeda, although Dr. Al-Jabri noted that Saudi Arabia is not aware of any Yemeni moves against Al Qaeda from the September attempted assassination of Deputy Interior Minister Mohammed bin Naif until the actions in December. MOI has concluded that this is because Yemen hoped to use Al Qaeda to fight the Houthis. It was only when Al Qaeda refused to extend the truce with the ROYG that Yemen was forced to act against them.

¶5. (S) MOI does not see much cooperation per se between Al Qaeda and the southern separatists, although says one group of separatists is closely affiliated with Al Qaeda. The SAG also believes that Al Qaeda may have moved through Houthi land until recently with its knowledge and possible local assistance. Al-Jabri said that Saudi Arabia had seen "savage" Houthi attacks on Sunni villages in Yemen, with no AQAP retaliation.

¶6. (S) MOI believes the million dollar question is why the Houthis attacked the Saudi border; the best answer they can come up with is that Iran directed them to do so, likely in retaliation for the suicide attacks last fall in Iran. Shia in Saudi:

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¶7. (C) Al-Jabri said that relations between Saudi Sunni and Shia, concentrated predominantly in the Eastern Province, are getting better, thanks in part to greater tolerance from King Abdullah, such as lifting the travel ban to Iran, which has allowed a number of Saudi Shia to see for themselves that the Iranian revolution is not all it is cracked up to be. Al-Jabri said that Saudi Shia, many of whom work for either Aramco or the local government, have a much better standard of living than other Shia in the region. Saudi Arabia has had tense relations with Iran over several regional issues, including Iraq. Al-Jabri said that Saudi Arabia has provided Iran with information on the presence of AQ affiliates inside Iran, and asked for assistance in addressing these individuals, with no results to date. Al-Jabri said that it was typical for each Iranian agency to claim it was the responsibility of another. Al-Jabri also said that Saudi Arabia had reached the conclusion that its restrictions on international activities of Saudi charities had inadvertently given Iran a free hand to operate, including in South American and Africa, as well as in Yemen.

Iraq:

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¶8. (C) Al-Jabri said that Saudi Arabia was not happy with what it perceived as Iranian influence in Iraq, although it has seen indications that Iraqi actors are increasingly unhappy with Iran. Al-Jabri said that MOI has very good ties with some Iraqi security forces, despite issues at the political level. Over the longer term, Al-Jabri expected Saudi Arabia and Iraq would again enjoy good relations, if for no other reason than the Kingdom is the "only one" of Iraq's neighbors that does not have an agenda it is pushing with Iraq (e.g., recovery of territory). Saudi Arabia would prefer that the next government be a truly national government, rather than the current "government of factions," which would be better able to hold discussions based on national interest, which would help reintegrate it with the Arab world.

Syria:

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¶9. (C) Al-Jabri said that relations between the Saudi and Syrian security services have improved, and expected that on

January 28, Syria should have returned 9 Saudis from detention. Al-Jabri said Syria is the most cooperative country in repatriating Saudis in prison. Al-Jabri is aware Syria is less cooperative with other neighboring countries (e.g., Jordan, Lebanon), but welcomes the recent return of cooperation, which stopped after 2005.

TSA:

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¶9. (SBU) Al-Jabri and his team underscored the ongoing sensitivity of TSA regulations requiring additional vigilance for all Saudi travelers. They questioned whether the measures TSA is adopting are productive, and noted that these actions are undermining public support for greater bilateral cooperation. Al-Jabri cited the example of NSEERS, which seemed to achieve little in terms of identifying individuals worthy of greater security attention, while doing a lot of harm in terms of aggravating thousands of innocent travelers by imposing rigorous requirements on them. Al-Jabri said that the SAG very much hopes that these new regulations will be temporary, so that they will not dissuade Saudi parents from sending their children on scholarships to the U.S. for fear that they will not be able to complete their education. Al-Jabri also said that individual DHS officers can be discourteous at times, as happened to him three times, which further ingrains Saudi concerns and suspicions they are being singled out, or denied entry for no clear reason.

OPM-MOI

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¶10. (SBU) Al-Jabri was very complimentary of the growing cooperation to protect critical Saudi infrastructure. He said that the King was very happy, and that this cooperation was having positive effects on the rest of the bilateral relationship. MOI is very pleased with the cooperation from USG agencies, which form one team, and Saudi Arabia intends to expand it into other areas, like cybercrime.

¶11. (U) This cable has been cleared by A/S Feltman.

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